

1: HUM American Cinema Telecourse

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Recommended for film studies, American studies and cultural studies courses, the book is divided into three parts and subdivided into sixteen chapters that still follow a quasi-chronological order. Not only in this specific case but in general, we can state for sure that Belton does not deal with European film industry or film history and practically shows cinema as a pure American invention with no roots in the Old Continent. Following a chronological order from the kinetoscope through the nickelodeons to movie palaces, the reader gets a hint of American social relations at the turn of the century, accompanied with the appearance of film narratives. Inasmuch theory or theories are concerned, Belton puts them aside as much as he can, and even if he tries to pin down his examples to some film theories he does so by referring to American, not so well-known or key-note theorists. Even though Belton does not accept or at least does not promote the European version of the origins of film and the cinema, he should apply or tend to refer to European film theorists, semioticians or philosophers in his argumentation. Subsequently, in the first part of the book, we have a chapter on narration in classical Hollywood cinema. Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the studio and star systems in Hollywood. The listing and introduction of the major and minor studios throughout the 20th century somewhat remind me of the entries of an encyclopedia: The films mentioned are hardly known and, what is more important, too old to be easily available for those who would like to watch them at least in this part of the world. Belton picked the wrong horse with this listing approach since this chapter turns out to be one of the least exciting ones in the book. Moreover, the useful and important information on the Hollywood studio system get oppressed by this load of data – the only exception may be the subchapters dealing with vertical integration and block booking, blind bidding, runs, zones and clearances. The following chapter has a somewhat similar approach – more than necessary examples are piled upon one another. With case studies of Tom Hanks, Marilyn Monroe and others, Belton turns again to his encyclopedia-building approach and slows down or even breaks the flow of the chapter; the historical overview of stardom even seems a bit old-fashioned. In the second part of the book six different types of genres are introduced and analyzed, namely: The Extra-Terrestrial and A. Artificial Intelligence, which are definitely not silent films, but their applying is a great way to give students an idea what melodrama is. Actually, the aim of the chapter to emphasize the strict relation of melodramatic film and culture is wittily fulfilled, although the theoretical background is still missing, or vaguely mentioned. Structured on the basis of musical forms, the chapter gives an extensive overview of this genre – an easy-to-understand categorization of musicals is presented to the reader. Although most people would claim that musicals are seemingly unrealistic or fantasy-like, Belton soon convinces the reader that in its context, the musical is just as realistic as any other genre therefore should not be prejudged. Brightly, the author adds at the end of the chapter that animated features for children prepared the stage for the comeback of musicals yet it is worth considering whether this comeback would be as successful and long-lasting as it was decades ago. Belton argues in chapter 8 that American comedy and culture cannot be separated since it is precisely culture or rather the tensions within culture that generates comedy. Referring wittily to Freud and a quasi-psychoanalytic approach to comedies, he legitimizes the existence and importance of comedies as a genre that is never taken seriously, therefore has the possibility to articulate unspeakable problems within culture and society without being attacked for it. Belton constructs this chapter so that he can mention all the matters that generate the finally articulated tensions: This summary is a brilliantly composed one with just the necessary amount of examples. The second part of the chapter gives introspection into the history of American comedy starting from the silent film era Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, etc. Belton claims that war film is the maximization of spectacles and emotions. The topic of race and ethnicity comes back again. Belton concludes with the war film as the mediator between us and the possibility of wars: War films serve as educators, inasmuch as they tell us why wars are necessary, how to bear defeat or victory; but moreover to emphasize our right to wars even though we may not be the winner. Providing a

historical and ideological background of film noir, Belton introduces probably his best composed and most to-the-point chapter in the book. The author acknowledges that film noir lacks the institutional status of traditional genres and can be defined in several ways. To provide the clearest picture of it, he approaches film noir from several stands, including aesthetics, themes, archetypical characters and cultural background production code, censorship, etc. Applying the theories of Laura Mulvey and Sigmund Freud helps Belton pinning down his argumentation on women, especially on the character of the femme fatale. Originating from the nineteenth-century, the myth of the Western is just as important and strong these days as it used to be – that is the claim of the author in chapter 11. Belton articulates the American-ness of the genre in a couple of pages, gathering more and more historical and ideological proof. He repeatedly refers to Frederick Jackson Turner and his frontier thesis as a kind of theoretical base of the Western. However odd it might seem, it is true, and Belton manages to prove it pretty well: The third part of the book investigates postwar American cinema. Including the subchapters on the Cold War era, the age of television, the significant and transforming role of counterculture, the film school generation and the changes towards the twenty-first century, this part leads the reader to nowadays American film culture. The thorough historical review of the Cold War period is of great help for non-American readers especially for those who were born at around the end of it. This period is far in space and time for young readers and as a matter of fact the activity of Hollywood related to this topic is even more out of the spectrum in the case of students coming from post-socialist countries. For political and ideological reasons American anti-Communist films were cut off from the peoples of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Block. Because of this very reason, this chapter proves to be the most informative for these students. After losing much of its audience due to social changes, Hollywood had to come up with a couple of technological inventions to attract people. Belton concludes with a remark on the fact that movie-goers have lower and lower expectations towards the cinema, since it has not been changed fundamentally in the last 30 years, whereas – as previous subchapters point out – home entertainment is getting more and more advanced and spectacular even awesome. The clash of the marginal and the mainstream is in the focus of chapter. Belton points out several political factors that generated an overwhelming change in the American cinema: When these problems surfaced in the s, the cinema had to accommodate itself to the new waves. This change, with the explicit articulation of taboos drugs, sex, etc. *Hair*, *Bonnie and Clyde* or *Easy Rider* are just three of this prolific period, and great examples to explain the distinctive features of counterculture cinema. Belton reminds the reader that a split in the cinema can be detected in the s: The otherwise smooth flow of the chapter is again disturbed by the hundreds of unnecessary data which are actually collected at the end of the chapter in a table format. The challenge is great, since the films presented are so recent that it seems to be hard to pinpoint any clear-cut ideology behind them. Belton tries as hard as he can to define the influencing factors and does have some brilliant observations but the coherence of the chapter is a bit off balance. Its language is smooth, the pictures are illustrative and its logically built up structure helps the students get initiated to the field of film studies step by step. Note [1] John Belton. All subsequent references to this book will be in the text.

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